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Q8(b)

The decade 1989-1999 has created an epochal shift in the Indian party system at the national level. Identify the major national trends in the party system during this era

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Party System

Party System: National and regional political parties, ideological and social bases of parties; patterns of coalition politics; Pressure groups, trends in electoral behaviour; changing socio-economic profile of Legislators.

Core demand of the question

- The decade 1989-1999 has created an epochal shift in the Indian party system at the national level. Identify the major national trends in the party system during this era. (15 marks)

Revision summary

1989 ended the expectation of a Congress majority as the normal national result.

- **The decade's governments were minority or coalition:** National Front, Congress minority, United Front, and NDA.

The BJP rose as the second national pole; OBC and State parties became regular Union bargainers.

Kothari's Congress system gave way to a federalised multi-party system.

The shift is epochal at the national level even though later majorities created a further phase.

Introduction

From 1989 to 1999 the national party system moved away from Congress dominance toward a multi-party, coalition, and federalised pattern. The shift is epochal because no single party again formed a full-term majority government in that decade, and because regional parties entered the Union executive as a regular fact.

Body

End of the old Congress system

- **Rajni Kothari's** Congress system - a dominant party with factions and a weak opposition - broke after 1989.
- The **1989 election** produced a hung Lok Sabha. V. P. Singh's National Front government depended on outside support, a new national format.
- Congress returned in **1991** as a minority under P. V. Narasimha Rao and completed a term by management, not by restoration of one-party dominance.
- The 1996-98 United Front and the 1998-99 National Democratic Alliance made coalition the normal path to the Union cabinet.

Major national trends

- Hung parliaments and coalition or minority governments at the Centre, instead of a single-party majority as the expected result.
- Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party as the principal national alternative, from a small 1984 tally to leading the NDA by 1998-99, with the 1992 Ayodhya sequence as a polarising national cleavage.
- **Mandalisation:** OBC parties and the Janata family fragments became national veto and alliance players after 1990 reservation politics.
- **Federalisation of the national party system:** State parties (TDP, DMK, AIADMK, SAD, Shiv Sena, RJD, SP, and others) bargained over Union portfolios and policy.
- Decline of a neat two-party alternative; a bipolar tendency around Congress and BJP still had to pass through regional allies.
- Economic liberalisation after 1991 changed the policy space that parties contested, even when caste and temple remained the mass languages.
- Fragmentation of the Janata tradition and of the Left's national reach, with the Left still decisive in 1996-97 support politics.

Why it is epochal

- **Dahl's** contestation became multi-polar at the Union level, not only a Congress-versus-rest election.
- Centralising Union governments had to share the cabinet, which is a party-system limit on the federal tilt discussed in Q7(a).
- The 1999 NDA full term after the decade's instability confirmed that the new format could also deliver a completed Lok Sabha, still as a coalition.
- The epoch is 1989-99 as the break. Later single-party majorities after 2014 are another phase, not a return of the 1952-64 Congress system.

Flow diagram

1989 -> Hung Lok Sabha
 Hung Lok Sabha -> Coalitions and minority
 Coalitions and minority -> BJP as national pole
 Coalitions and minority -> Regional parties in Union
 Coalitions and minority -> Mandal OBC parties

Conclusion

The major national trends of 1989-1999 were the end of Congress dominance, hung Houses, coalition federalism, the BJP's rise, and Mandal's party effects. Together they created a multi-party national system. That is the epochal shift.

Facts & figures

1989 election

Hung Lok Sabha; V. P. Singh's National Front government with outside support.

Mandal, 1990

OBC reservation decision that split the Janata coalition and realigned Hindi-belt parties.

1991

Congress minority government under P. V. Narasimha Rao; economic liberalisation began in this party format.

1996-99

United Front governments and then BJP-led NDA, confirming coalition as the Union path.

Kothari's Congress system

The pre-1967/1977 model of a dominant party that 1989 finally displaced at the national level.

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